
AN IMAGE OF 19th CENTURY BRITAIN IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL

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Abstract

This essay is about how Charles Dickens' novella A Christmas Carol is reflecting the 19th century Britain during Victorian age. Here Dickens used his own experiences with the sufferings of this era. He described about the class differences between high class and low class people, rich people's money-minded behavior, sufferings of poor people, their physical illness and their tradition of celebration of Christmas.

"He made out of Victorian England a complete world, with a life and vigor and idiom of its own, quite unlike any other world there has ever been."(CD: TWOHN: 1958: P -1)

A Christmas Carol was published in 1843 at that time it became one of the most beloved Christmas stories ever written and its characters symbols of human qualities. In his novels and stories Charles Dickens dealt with social issues and difficulties of the poor which was something what he himself experienced as a child. Dickens's novella combines harsh criticism of society on one hand with hearty celebration of Christmas on the other. Here it's a focus on the reflection of the nineteenth century Britain in *A Christmas Carol* as well as on *A Christmas Carol* as a genuine literary work. The main aim is to make a clear connection between Dickens's novella and the time and experience in which it was produced. The main topics is society and work conditions, the quality of life in Victorianism, Christmas and, regarding the characters and allegorical nature of the story, moral values and Christian virtues cannot be left out either.

As *A Christmas Carol* is a literary work the relationship between its structure and themes must also be included. These are for example memories, moral transformation and also ignorance and want. Special attention will be paid to deserves mentioning is the fact that Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* helped to revive celebrating Christmas in Britain. The character of Ebenezer Scrooge will be contrasted with the character of Tiny Tim on the basis of their exclamations "Bah! Humbug!" and "God bless us every one!" The relationship between Scrooge and the three ghosts will be mentioned above. The

title itself suggests that the Victorian era had some impact on the literary work. One of the aims of this project is to explore what extent is *A Christmas Carol* influenced by the times in which it was produced. Another issue related to this is Dickens's criticism of society at that time.

As the nineteenth century was the time of great changes here this project will look at how these changes affected lives of ordinary people and how it is reflected in the story. To mention at least one of the examples from the book, the home of the Cratchit family is the source for a wide research. Special attention will be devoted to Scrooge's transformation as it is the main theme of the novella. His journey which takes just one night takes him to various places and each of them has its symbolism and meaning. It presents a variety of people and with their contribution Scrooge realizes what is important in one's life. *A Christmas Carol* is still popular at present so it takes a brief look at Scrooge redemption. It is really the sentimental fact that money is not everything and that we all should be good not only at Christmas time. As has been mentioned above the main aim of the thesis is to connect Dickens's novella with the nineteenth century and this cannot be done without exploring the *A Christmas Carol* as a literary work.

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, at the beginning of the second decade of the nineteenth century and he grew up during the reign of three kings of the House of Hanover until Queen Victoria took the reign in 1837. He lived through the years after the Industrial revolution and before formation of modern Britain. Although Britain became the most powerful country in the nineteenth century with the industrialization growing rapidly and middle classes rising, after Napoleonic wars the situation was not so bright. Many people lost their jobs as factories did not have to produce as much as before and at the same time the prices increased too. In this sense the migration from country fields to city factories and the end of war caused huge unemployment and misery. At that time the welfare system was not developed much. Although there were efforts to help people in need through the operation of workhouses the reality was harsh and the help was not organized and so not much effective.

Here Charles Dickens mentioned the POOR LAW ACT, WORKHOUSES,

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" said Scrooge.

"Both very busy, sir" [ACC: 2015: P- 16]

When the two portly gentlemen visit Scrooge to gain some money for the charity he is inquiring whether prisons and workhouses still exist as he considers them the right place for the unlucky ones. He is convinced that the taxes he has to pay is enough and does not want to spend any more money on the "idle people". The idle people were in fact children without parents, homeless people or those who could not find work. Child

labour was not unusual and it influenced Dickens directly. When he was twelve years old his father's debts became no longer bearable and he was sent to debtor's prison with his family. To pay his lodgings Dickens started working in a blacking warehouse and it was this sad experience that made him so interested in problems of society years later. The character of Scrooge may seem a bit exaggerated at times but it is the opposite to Dickens's own views of society and charity.

When we analysis Dickens works we can find his views and background reflects in his works. Charles Dickens was a realist writer who continuously criticized English society for lack of empathy and its oblivious and indifferent attitude towards the poor. Not only in *A Christmas Carol* he depicts nineteenth century London as a dark, dirty place where children are abused and neglected and individuals have to struggle for survival. In the *A Christmas Carol* it is the Cratchit family who deal with financial difficulties. Dickens's father's financial trouble caused not only his son's early employment but also a brief school attendance.

A Christmas Carol is set in London but no exact date is given. It most probably takes place in the year of its publication. However, exact time is not very important in the *A Christmas Carol*. The time in the novella is divided into past, present and future as it is represented by the ghosts and the important thing is what goes with these periods. Concerning the character of Scrooge it is the life of an individual that matters, his memories and conscience rather than historical dates. Dickens experienced a poor background during his childhood but gained great success that enabled him to learn about two different worlds. One is the world of the poor and the other is the world of money and politics.

The characters in the *A Christmas Carol*, for example, come from higher middle class, middle class and lower class. His criticism of society was not as original as it may seem today but his celebrity status allowed him to draw the general public's attention to problems of society. Social criticism is not the main theme of the *A Christmas Carol*, it is merely symbolic. Although Scrooge represents the general opinion about the poor the more significant themes in the novella are charity and family. Dickens considered it unfair that the poor and disadvantaged had to bear the flaws of society the most. This strong belief came from his childhood when there was not anybody who would have cared about him.

As mentioned earlier the characters in the *A Christmas Carol* come from different social classes. Scrooge is an owner of a counting-house, a well-situated person as far as money is concerned. However, his peculiar character does not allow him to enter any community or any class. Scrooge's nephew Fred is probably a middle class gentleman although Scrooge, when confronted with Fred's good Christmas humour, uses the word "poor" as the reason why Fred should not be so merry. The Cratchit family represents England's poor who suffer under the control of the powerful ones.

"Questions of class are fundamental to nineteenth century British history" [ACC: 2015: P- 14]

Fred realizes this hierarchy too when he says that at Christmas people

"open their shut-up hearts freely and think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave" [ACC: 2015: P- 14]

A Christmas Carol reality as far as the classes are concerned is not as dark as it may seem. Although they live modestly and their home is very humble the Cratchits find joy elsewhere than in money. And as Dickens suggests in the character of Scrooge money itself cannot bring happiness. Another thing is that, although workhouses are still in operation in *A Christmas Carol*, there are people who realize that such help is not enough and that charity and empathy is the key to humanity. However, at Christmas everyone celebrates regardless the class. In *A Christmas Carol* it is the Lord Mayor who

"... gave orders to his fifty cooks ..." but also the little tailor "whom [the Mayor] had fined five shillings" [ACC: 2015: P18]

Thus, untypically, the social classes do not play such an important role in the Carol. Dickens rather points out that it is up to an individual to come to terms with one's own situation and discover the joy of Christmas time. Family and friends gatherings are an important part in the novella as they present characters which are no longer alive or present in Scrooge's life but still they bear great significance. Through his magical visitations Scrooge slowly realizes that he replaced family and friends for money. Family was as significant to Victorian society as to Charles Dickens himself. Several families occur in the novella and the importance of family. Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's devoted clerk, supports his large family and tries hard to raise his children and secure them. He even gets a job for his son. The Cratchit family corresponds with the traditional model of the family. The father is the head of the family and the mother is a housewife whose task is to take care of the children and the house.

Dickens depicts the Cratchits as a closely knit family and this can be seen when they all participate in preparing Christmas dinner. Nobody is overlooked or neglected and everyone lends a hand. Their home is in Camden Town, a place where Dickens himself lived for a short period of time. Another connection with Dickens's own life is the relationship of Scrooge's father to his son. It is implied that Scrooge as a boy was neglected and that his unhappy childhood caused his fear and reluctance to keep any relationships.

"Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home's like Heaven! He spoke so gently to me one dear night when I was going to bed, that I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home; and he said Yes, you should; and sent me in a coach to bring you." [ACC: 2015: P- 42]

The theme of family may have come from Dickens's own experience but it also corresponds with the general notion of family as it occurred at the end of the eighteenth century and continued throughout the following one. Scrooge, neglected

by his own family, finds a way out of his inner uncertainties in work and, subsequently, money. As can be seen in the case of the Cratchit family, nineteenth century families were larger than today's average families. That was because of high infant mortality and no methods of family planning. The Cratchits have six children including a disabled son. Cratchit's eldest daughter Martha is an apprentice at milliner's, eldest son Peter is supposed to follow in his father's footsteps and become "a man of business". Whether any of the children is educated is not mentioned. However, Peter Cratchit, at least, seems to be literate.

As mentioned earlier Dickens considered education a fundamental condition for a proper and decent life. He himself was educated with considerable breaks and in the *A Christmas Carol* the only mention of education is when Scrooge observes his younger self at a boarding school. However, for some the Victorian parents it was more profitable to send their child to work rather than to school. However, it implies that there was a true appreciation of education as children who were forced to start working at very early age were sent to school if it was possible. Later in the century the school attendance became compulsory and more teachers were trained as the schooling system was undergoing radical changes. Education was not available for everyone, however, at the beginning of the nineteenth century there was not any lack of schools and illiteracy was not as common as it may seem.

Standard of Living is also reflects Victorian society. Homes of several families occur in *A Christmas Carol*, despite the fact that their description is quite poor; it provides some insight to nineteenth century housing. The Cratchits, for example, live in a four-roomed house in Camden Town, not a luxurious place to live, obviously. Dickens portrays the nineteenth century London in his novels with all its flaws and dirt. However, in *A Christmas Carol* his intention is not primarily to criticize the horrible housing conditions. Although he mentions places like workhouses and prisons and thus he points to problems of society he does not attack housing deficiencies. The Cratchits do not seem to be happy about their situation but still they can keep a decent home. Although they represent the England's poor their financial situation could be much worse.

The quality of life is closely related to health and medical care. In *A Christmas Carol* it is implied that the nineteenth century health service was much dependent on one's financial situation. Tiny Tim suffers from an unspecified disease and he is likely to die. However, when Scrooge takes care of him and helps his family with money his state improves quickly. In industrial cities where slums were expanding it was easy for diseases to spread among the poor labourers. The characters of Ignorance and Want are not only symbols of indifference. They also represent children living in an unhealthy, filthy environment. Another character whose fate is much related to health care in Tiny Tim. Dickens's intention is to alert society and warn about the world in which an innocent child can die although its illness is curable. Tiny Tim's medical treatment is not

described and even the disease he suffers from is not specified but it is very likely to be caused by malnutrition and lack of vitamins. Nevertheless, Tiny Tim's illness is cured and his health improves soon. The character of Tiny Tim is most probably inspired by Dickens's "sickly young" brother Fred whom he called "Tiny Fred".

Death is closely related to health and in the nineteenth century cities it was ubiquitous as in *A Christmas Carol*. It is also one of the main themes of the novella and constitutes a gloomy counterpart to Christmas merriment. Both Scrooge and Tiny Tim are dead in the fourth stave. Actually, the whole fourth stave is focused on death and the character of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come strikingly resembles the character of Death. The third Christmas Spirit is far more horrifying than the previous two.

"a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist among the ground, towardshim" [ACC: 2015: P- 86]

Scrooge even tells the phantom that he fears it more than the previous two and the churchyard scene in which Scrooge finds his own grave is a horror climax of the stave. For the most part of the story Tiny Tim is on the edge of death. In this character Dickens combines the image of an innocent child with the fact that such person is constantly living under the threat of death. This ambiguity is essential for *A Christmas Carol*. The shadow of death was also stretching over polluted cities. It is not surprising that death rates in nineteenth century England were very high and life expectancy was generally shorter than today. However, during Victoria's reign the situation improved resulting in "the overall fall in mortality". In *A Christmas Carol* there is a slight contradiction in the description of Christmas London and the appearance of Ignorance and Want.

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both..." [ACC: 2015: P- 100]

These two characters imply that living in a city is life-threatening but Dickens's description of London in most part of the novella is rather focused on the Christmas spirit than criticism of unhealthy environment. In the nineteenth century Christmas in Britain differed from what we know today. The cheerful celebrations depicted in the *A Christmas Carol* were rather rare if there were any. However, the Victorian Christmas started the tradition of celebrating this holiday with all its attributes such as the Christmas tree, cards, dinner and gift giving. The lore came from Germany as Queen Victoria's husband Albert, who was sympathetic with the British and their situation, brought the tradition to his new home.

In 1848, five years after the publication of the *A Christmas Carol*, a drawing of the royal family gathered around a Christmas tree was published. The gradual process of reviving the tradition of celebrating Christmas goes hand in hand with the changes in whole society. Although Christmas is a Christian, religious holiday the Victorian concept is more about family unity, gatherings, charity and the overall secular, joyful spirit rather than praying to God and rejecting worldly delights in order to be a good Christian. "There were no Christmas cards in 1843 England, no Christmas trees in royal residences,

no Christmas turkeys. These are the some of the differences between early Victorian Christmas and the one into which the newly discovered traditions transformed.

“The simple future tense, the clarity about where Scrooge's present path will lead, the exact hour of the visitation – all of these speak to a predetermined future” [Volume 13 (2011) Issue 4 Article 10: P-6]

A Christmas Carol presents England as it was in the early Victorian era with its social problems, deficiencies and poor morals. However, Dickens's novella combines reality with a heart-warming story of transformation which conveys author's personal beliefs and thus becomes partly autobiographical. Although some the characters are not very realistic they are easy to remember as they present universal qualities which were valid not only in the Victorian era.

The poverty and hardship Dickens depicts in *A Christmas Carol* were especially poignant for Londoners in Victorian England. The redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge and his transition from a greedy Wretch to a giving, socially minded individual squandered an outpouring of charity in the 1840s which continues on today. For, as Dickens suggests, the meaning of Christmas is to be found in the spirit of giving, surrounded by those you love. *A Christmas Carol* is a well-constructed work in which Dickens links his personal views, which were affected by his childhood experience, with the overall nature of the nineteenth century society in England.

This reflects about how Victorian society criticized in this novel *A Christmas Carol*. It reflects how Dickens criticized Britain society from his childhood to before his publication of this novella. He criticized Victorian era family, their food, celebration of Christmas, want and ignorance of the Victorian children and class difference between high and low class people. Here he expressed about Scrooge as high class family, Fred as a middle class family and Bob as a poor family. These characters indirectly reflect the peoples whom lived in Victorian era.

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Abbreviation

- ACC – A Christmas Carol
- CD: TWOHN – Charles Dickens: The WORLD Of His Novels
- RJELAL – Research Journal of English Language and Literature
- GJHSS-G – Global Journal of Human- Social Science: G Linguistics & Education